2,597 Words

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Flint, Michigan

Demon Rum and Vicious Nature Make a Hell on Earth

I was born of Norwegian parents in the little town of Hetland, South Dakota. There were nine of us children, seven boys and two girls. I was next to the oldest and lived like a scared rabbit through my whole childhood.

Mother was a kind hearted hard working woman, but Dad had a vicious, cruel nature and made life very miserable for all of us. He made a fairly good living for us in the photograph business until he started drinking and gambling, which made a demon of him, although he was always careful not to let any of our neighbors or friends suspect he was so cruel to us, and mother would never complain to anyone. Finally, his business started to fail as he would be drunk so much of the time that he could not attend to his work. He finally decided to sell out and buy a farm so Mother took us children, there being six at that time, and went to spend the winter with her parents in Iowa while Dad went to Minnesota to find a new location.

He found just the place that he would like on the banks of the Clear Water River. He made a down payment on it and went to the city where he had the rest of his money, but while there he got started to drinking and gambling till he had lost all the money, but about a hundred dollars, so of course that made it impossible f or him to buy the farm. He told my uncle what he had done so he helped him to move onto a quarter section of school land. There was an old house and barn made of logs on the place and we did not have to pay rent on it. Dad took the hundred dollars and bought a team of horses, some way he managed to buy a couple cows, and my grandfather helped Mother with money several times, he being a well-to-do farmer. We lived on his place four years in misery and poverty. Dad would not help with any of the farm work, leaving everything to Mother and the boys. The only time he would work was a couple months in the fall. He would go out to the harvest fields and about three months every winter he would go to the lumber woods. Sometimes he would bring a few dollars home but he usually would be about broke when he came home.

My brother, Len, had to work like a man when he was only twelve years old and even then Dad would beat him something pitiful. He hit him across the back with a pitch fork because he did not get the hay loaded even in the rack and he has had kidney trouble ever since. The doctors

say he has one undeveloped kidney, caused more than likely from an injury when he was a child.

Mother and the boys did all the work even to putting up the hay for winter. Len would have to haul the firewood from a Tamarac swamp fifteen miles away. It was nothing unusual for the weather to be forty below zero and the boys would have to bring the wood in to saw it into stove lengths, as they were not dressed to stand the extreme cold.

Mother done everything she could to make things better for us. She sewed everything we wore, even to our underwear and the boys' overalls and spun the yarn to knit our stockings and mittens from.

Dad never showed any love for any of us children and we were so afraid of him we didn't dare speak above a whisper when he was around, but when he would leave the house would really break loose and play like other children. One time he came back before we expected him and we all got a whipping.

We lived twenty two minutes inland from a railroad. All our provisions had to be hauled by team from Thief River Falls. The roads were most always bad making it necessary to take two days to make the trip in order to give the horses a chance to rest up for the return trip. Father was going to make this trip just two weeks after my sister Carol was born. Mother had just received one hundred dollars from her father, Dad wanted it. Mother did not give it to him as she had many uses for it, and he went away very angry. We all went to bed about nine o'clock that night. At one in the morning we were awakened by the awfulest crashes. The first thing Mother thot was that the Indians had gone on the warpath. There was an Indian reservation a few miles from where we lived, but it was Dad, he had not stopped to rest the horses. He just stayed long enough to git drunk and then came home to get revenge. He took a long club and run around the house and smashed every pane of glass in the place. If Mother had give him the money he would not have come home till he had it all spent. He beat Mother up just awful when he came in. We did not see him for about two weeks after that, except for a couple times, the boys found him sleeping in the horse manger. He kept a jug of alcohol with him, in the woods, and kept drunk most of the time.

It was right in haying time and altho the baby was only two weeks old, Mother had to be right along to do the stacking. I never heard my Mother talk back to my Dad and she never complained to anyone. She never had a doctor when she had her babies. Dad always took care of her till the baby came then he would send out to get a woman to come in and wash it the first time, after that she would do it herself. The summer my youngest brother was born Mother was very ill before he came and we thot she was going blind. She could not stand the light at all and she was so pale and sick all the time, but Dad would not get the doctor for her.

He took care of her till the baby was born then he woke me up to come and wash it. I was fourteen years of age but I was afraid to handle the little thing. It only weighted three pounds and it was so thin. I tried to do my best but mother helped me and I shook so, I was afraid I would hurt it. Dad figured he had done his part.

When my sister was about two years old Dad was going to whip her and family dog jumped on him and would not let him touch her, this made him so angry he rain in the house and came out with a shotgun. As soon as I saw him with the gun I thot he was going to shoot all of us so I started to run just as fast as I could to my Uncle's, two and a half miles away. I could hear him shooting as I ran, I caught a ride with the mailman. He asked me what was the matter and I said "my Dad is shooting the whole family". He took me to my Uncle's and I begged him to go and see what he could do. He did not like to go but my Aunt went with him. When they got there he had quieted down. It was the dog he had tried to shoot but the dog got behind the corner stone of the granary and when Dad would shoot the dog would duck behind the stone. We sure worshipped that dog after that. Dad heard someone had reported that he was shooting the family and I was so afraid he would find out and kill me.

Late that fall we had a terrible windstorm. It blew the tops off two of the haystacks and Dad blamed Mother for it because she had stacked them. He came in swearing and cursing her, he pulled his boots off and threw them at her, then he took off his socks and slapped her, first on one side of the face and then the other. She never said a word, altho you could see it hurt her awful. Finally he went to bed and after he went to sleep the rest of us went to be, about one o'clock I awoke and seen there was a light downstairs. I was worried so I went down to see what was the matter. There was Dad, sitting at the tabel writing. He told me to go back to bed. I no more than go back in bed than I heard him comming up the stairs. I was frozen stiff with fright. He came up and got some cartarages out of a trunk then he went down and I heard him take the gun from the wall and go out. As soon as I heard the door shut I called Mother and she came right up. I said "oh Mama, what is he going to do?" She said "he is just trying to scare us" and just then we heard a shot. Mother went downstairs again. Dad came in and all he said was "I thot I could scare you old girl". Then he went back to bed and never spoke a word for three week. That was the way he would do whenever he had one of his spells.

Finally the land we were living on was sold so Dad had to look for a new location. He took up a homestead in Northern Minnesota and we moved there in the spring. We took all our livestock with us and if Dad would just have helped a little we could have made a good living, but instead he drank more and got uglier all the time. I was fifteen years old then. I could always get work away from home and did go out to work but then I would be so worried about the folks at home that I couldn't sleep half the time, when I did go to bed, and often I did manage to get to sleep, I would dream such terrible things about what dad was doing, that I would wake up in a

cold sweat. The winter of nineteen six and nineteen seven I was helping out at a neighbor's where they had a new baby. I had been having a feeling that something awful was going to happen when I heard a knock at the door. It was a young man I had been going out with. He was the Township Constable and he came to tell me had just arrested my Dad. It was in the month of December and bitter cold. Dad had come home crazy drunk. He had a bar of solder about eight inches long and an inch thick which he beat my mother in the face with till she could hardly see. Then he took his rifle and started to shoot around her, the bullets coming so close she could feel them whiz thru her hair. She tried to run away once but Dad ran after her and caught her by the hair and pulled her back and started shooting at her again. Then he lay down in a drunken stupor, Mother grabbed a shawl and threw one over herself and ran all the way into town and reported it. The constable and a couple other men went out to get him and also gathered up the children hiding in the barns and brought them all into town. The did not have a jail in the little village of Lambert so they put him in a bedroom in the boarding house until they could take him to the county seat at Bemidjc. The room they put him was a room next to the kitchen. The partition between the bedroom and kitchen did not go all the way to the ceiling and my Dad noticed there was a shelf on the other side so he climbed upon the bed, he found a can of lye. He had a class of water in the room, he mixed the lye in the water and drank it. He suffered terriable. They had the doctor for him but he could not help him so much. He wanted Mother to come and see him but she could not go out on account of the condition of her face. I went to see him and talk to him. I was afraid of him, everyone around there told me they would not let him hurt me. He told me all the trouble came from us children and Mother always whispering and keeping secrets from him. I told him we never kept any secrets from him but that we were all so afraid of him that we did not dare to speak out loud when he was round. He sat and thot awhile and then he said maybe that is it. He said he was sorry had made us all so miserable.

The authorities took him to the county seat and we were notified three weeks later that he had died, but we did not have the money to go and see him. My Uncle went there two weeks later and tried to get a record of his death and burial but he failed to get any information about it, whether he died or not we will never know. We wrote and told his mother what had happened and she said she always knew if he mixed liquor with his temper something terriable was bound to happen.

Mother is seventy two years old and enjoys good health. All her boys grew up to be industrious, home loving men, and all have comfortable homes and make a good living. They all worship Mother and will do anything for her to make her happy. She never gave a thot to another marriage, just seemed content with her children. She makes her home with my youngest brother and is free to come and go as she likes. She usually takes a trip ever fall to see two of the boys still living in Minnesota.

I married the constable in the case three years later. I will admit I was afraid of marriage after what we all went thru, but I have had no regrets. We had seven boys and one girl and my husband has been kind and good to all of us and never cared about drink. We never would allow the stuff in our house. We have been married twenty eight years and our children are about all grown and there is none of them care about liquor or cards.

I am a victim of arthritis. Have had it for eleven years and have not walked for three years, but altho I suffer intense pain at times I would not, if I could, exchange the physical pain I have today, for the mental pain I suffered thru childhood. I am so thankful my children all had a happy childhood.

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